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ABSTRACT

For the last 10 years, polling data have recorded a consistent decline in the American citizen's support for public education. While public schools experienced an 8 percent decline in enrollment between 1968 and 1978, private school enrollment grew by 12 percent. The decline in quality of public education over the last 50 years appears strongly related to increasing pressures toward centralization and a steady increase in government control. Centralization and state control have resulted in withdrawn parental authority and decreased public school diversity. Public school improvement now depends on the creation of policy options for competitive public school systems that would restore the full participation of individual citizens to educational policy-making. Such participation does not necessarily mean a decentralized system, but one based on foundations of choice, opportunity, and community. These moral principles would be served at the state level by guaranteeing, for example, the rights of all students to attend any public school in their state and of all citizens to form their own school systems. Federal policy should demonstrate renewed support for individuals rather than institutions, through such policies as voucherizing Title 1 funds to maximize the choices available to disadvantaged students to obtain remedial work and compensating schools on the basis of performance criteria. (JBM)

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EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY, PARENTAL CHOICE AND COMMUNITY

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The Case for Reforming Public Education*

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Public education is facing both a crisis in legitimacy and an organizational crisis. The two are related. The public is withdrawing its support, which creates a crisis in legitimacy for any public undertaking. As organizations, the public schools are failing to perform. They are not delivering the goods. While we cannot hold the public schools totally responsible for this state of affairs, we must take a critical look at the organizational failures that have allowed the present situation to emerge. I will argue in this paper that the organizational crisis, as well as the crisis in legitimacy, stem from a fundamental violation of the moral precepts that underline our experiment in self-government. We have created systems that have made citizens and parents limited rather than full partners in education decision-making. Unless we return to full partnership for citizens, there is little hope that our public schools will be able to perform as expected.

The Problem

I am neither an educator nor an educational sage. This may well be a plus since both categories of professionals do not seem to have a lock on wisdom. Today, I want to talk about reforming public education, about the possibility of a public education system founded on parental and community choice that creates real educational opportunity.

*A speech given at a conference sponsored by the Heritage Foundation and the New Coalition for Social Change. Bibliography available upon request.

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Vouchers and tuition tax credits are key words that turn conservatives and libertarians on in the area of education. While it's always nice to be "turned on," we often miss real opportunities to make substantial reform in our public schools. In fact, I will argue, unless we can live in a world of theoretical purity, we should not push tax credits and vouchers past nominal levels of support. For part of the virtue of private schools is that they operate in a relatively unregulated world. In the real world of the omnipotent welfare state, we are to suppose naively that any but the most nominal aid to private schools will not be followed by regulation? Or that regulators will not find a way to regulate the most holy of holies, competition? While I continue to support any effort to bring more aid to private schools, I think we must also train our sights on the public schools, for there we will also find promising opportunities for reform.

The American public is ambivalent about public education, especially K-12. For the last ten years, polling data records a consistent decline of citizens' support for public education. Let us spend just a moment on these trends, because they give us a picture of how citizens feel and act towards their public institutions. In 1973, 60 percent of the public had a great deal of confidence in the public schools. By 1981 the percentage had dropped to 40 percent, while those with little confidence had increased from 11 to 25 percent. This lack of confidence has been reflected in the continuing failure of school bond issues and the unwillingness of citizens to support greater school operating costs. In 1980, 67 percent of those polled indicated they would not support increased school revenues, compared to 52 percent in 1969. Recent voting data confirms that citizens in local communities, states, and in Washington, are beginning to disinvest in their public schools.

However, the picture is not complete. Polling data also indicated that nearly 85 percent of all Americans still consider public education to be extremely important to one's future success, again ratifying Horace Mann's notion that education is the great equalizer of social conditions. While significant disinvestment is taking place in the public sector, there are counterbalancing trends. Ten years ago, almost all public policy sages were writing off the private schools. Yet today, they are the growth sector of elementary and secondary education. While public schools experienced an 8 percent decline in enrollment between 1968 and 1978, private schools experienced a 12 percent increase.

The conventional wisdom is that such an increase merely reflects white upper-class flight from the public school system. Emerging evidence and some common sense indicate that conventional wisdom is in need of repair. While social scientists and school lobby groups can argue about the effects of private education, it seems useful for us to look at two areas: race, and why parents are willing to make significant investments in private schools. On the question of race, emerging data suggests that all ethnic

groups are moving towards equal or over-representation in our private schools. In a recent article, Denis Doyle of the American Enterprise Institute, summarizes the findings in the following manner:

"When income is controlled for, being black is not negatively correlated with private school enrollment. There is even preliminary evidence that middle-class blacks are over-represented in private schools."

Should we be surprised? Polling data has consistently demonstrated that the highest rates of dissatisfaction with education are amongst inner-city blacks. Likewise, it has been urban parochial schools that have, in many cases, been the lighthouse schools for many minorities.

We must ask, why are parents making these costly investments in their children's education? Unless we are willing to state that 5.6 million parents are irrational, the answer must be that they are seeking a different quality of education than that afforded in public schools. In effect, what parents are saying is that human capital investments through the public sector are increasingly risky, and that they seek educational investments that are more predictable. Again, survey research would indicate that this line of reasoning is in accord with the public's view. The public has developed a broad consensus on what they want out of their public schools. Since 1970, discipline has been a number one concern of parents. Further, citizens want to see a return to excellence in the basic subjects of education. They want students to be literate, and to understand mathematics and history. Just as importantly, they want schools to instill the civic morality of our American experiment in self-governance, teach students how to think, reason and take control of their own lives. While some see this consensus as mean and narrow, I think, on reflection, we can call this merely a return to the basics of a liberal education.

Why the Malaise in Public Education?

As far as we know there has been no cataclysmic genetic change to make students dumber. We know that minority students, in good schools, perform equally with other groups. Then why the problem? Educators can give a number of answers--some valid, others specious. Some will argue that the permissive decades of the 1960's and 1970's ruined school morale and authority, and there is much weight to their argument. Others argue that not enough money is going into education, driving away good teachers and facilities. Here we must be skeptical. There is no conclusive evidence that money and performance are positively associated. Likewise, we see too many examples of good public and private schools where money is not the key ingredient. Explanations can go on forever. I would suggest

that the place to listen is in the trenches: to the parents, teachers and local administrators who must make public schools operate. What you will find is that parents have little real voice in educational decision making, teachers have very little authority and administrators spend most of their time trying to make 55 different sets of contradictory regulations from state and federal agencies operate in their school systems.

What we face in public education is an organizational crisis, one that stems from over 50 years of unrelated events that now create education systems that are not educational systems at all. Three events are worth mentioning:

First, public education has been subject to the same promises and pressures for centralization. Education theory held that consolidation of schools into large systems would create more efficient, effective, and responsive education organizations.

Second, while school systems were consolidating, there was also a steady increase in state control, which found its ultimate solution in Serrano-type decisions that effectively centralized financing in state legislatures.

Finally, the civil rights movement, with its just demand for equal access to public education, had the unintended effect of further centralizing school systems.

There were two casualties in the move to centralize educational authority and decision making. First, citizens and parents had less authority over their schools. Centralization also decreased the diversity amongst public schools. Second, centralization broke the bond between family, school and community. While modern, complex societies may be the death knell of community schools, what cannot be lost is the community of interest generated by local schools.

Is There Hope?

Many throw up their hands! Centralized public education is beyond redemption! I disagree. I would like to set forth arguments and policy options that can do much to restore public education. However, I must caution that what I recommend might not look like public education as it is presently constituted.

First, we must be clear about what is "public" about education. Public education is not government schools. Education can be justified on a number of grounds. Liberal education is justified because it allows man to live a life of liberty. But public education must be justified on narrower grounds. What makes it public? It is not a public good in the strict sense used by economists. Two key factors make it public in the American setting:

- o First, our experiment in self-governance is grounded on the notion that citizens have the moral obligation to reflect upon, choose, maintain, and change their governments. To discharge this duty they must have the capacity to reflect and choose. Thus, citizenship is the most important justification for the public character of education.
- o Second, our commercial republic demands high levels of entrepreneurship and skill to make it produce the levels of prosperity that we have come to expect. This is another strong justification for public education.

While these are strong justifications for public support of education, where we make the critical mistake is to think that public monopolies and government schools are the only organizational means to realize the goals of public education. Clearly, from examples within and without education, we know that this is not the case. Private schools seem to meet many of the tests for a "common school," and local governments have a broad range of experience in contracting for many governmental services.

It is precisely at this point that advocates for vouchers make their strongest case. They remain committed to the public character of education in terms of finance and policy but allow its provision to be left to the choices of parents and communities.

I would argue that we miss a real opportunity if we do not conceptualize and create policy options for competitive public school systems. The logic is straightforward: make education a public good and provide families or children with adequate resources to receive the education of their choice. What is being guaranteed is liberty to choose the education that best fits the goals and aspirations of family and child.

It is precisely at this point that public school advocates attack. Their argument is not just that vouchers will destroy public education (what they are really saying is that they think it will destroy government schools), but also that such schemes are immoral. They argue that such schemes will work to the disadvantage of minorities, the poor, and those who do not have the capacity to choose. Implicit in arguments of the National Education Association and The American Federation of Teachers is the fear that the position of teachers will be undermined. Such claims are, of course, discounted by those committed to reforming education, but they all too often go unanswered. These claims must be answered if we are to have a foundation for reforming public education.

Morality and Efficiency

The strongest justification for education systems based on parental choice, opportunity, and community is moral. Arguments for efficiency also dovetail nicely.

One of the moral imperatives of our experiment is found in the Federalist Papers. In "Federalist One," Alexander Hamilton stated that the presumption being tested in the ratification was,

"...whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice or are they forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force."

Our traditional notions of citizenship stem from this 18th century presumption. Citizens are the ultimate authority. Governments are derivative and secondary to citizen authority. If individuals are to meet the tests of citizenship laid down in this moral imperative, they must accept great responsibility and duty. They must have the education to reflect, and must develop their capacity to choose.

How do citizens learn to choose? There is only one way, and that is to choose. Clearly, the moral obligation in constitutional and democratic political systems is to provide the opportunities and information that maximize the capacity of citizens to reflect and choose. Hence, we have created public education to increase the capacity to reflect, and a federal system that, until recently, dispersed authority broadly so that citizens had multiple options to choose. If one looks at the history of local governments and public schools, one sees deep citizen involvement in their creation, in setting the terms in which they operate, and in overseeing their daily operations.

You may well ask what relevance does this bit of political theory on citizenship have to present day public education? "Not much," is the correct answer. And this is the problem that must be addressed.

One single reform theory of education organization and decision making has controlled our thinking and actions towards public education for the last 50 years. That theory held that the fragmentation of authority and responsibility for education in numerous small school districts created a system that was inefficient, ineffective, and unresponsive to the educational needs of the country and of children. The remedy was consolidation into large systems which would realize economies of scale and provide better educational opportunities. Thus, over the last 30 years, there has not only been a massive consolidation of our schools, but also a steady centralization of authority in state departments of education and, today, by federal regulations.

But what of education and citizenship? One has only to look at the terms used to describe the citizen's role in education to see the change. Today, "education citizenship" means membership on advisory boards, dealing with large bureaucracies, and voting for school board members who have little authority. Since citizens have less and less voice in real education decision making, is it any wonder they give education low marks, do not participate, and are willing to make significant investments in private institutions?

What we have accomplished is to make citizens and parents limited partners in public education. Thus, is it any wonder that powerful interest groups control education or that many parents and communities seek redress through the courts, since real political solutions are blocked? And, this is precisely where our public schools violate the moral imperatives of self-governance. One might well call it systematic immorality. To argue that poor parents or minorities should not have the right to choose, because they might make the wrong choice, not only violates the moral imperatives of American government, but also denies them the very opportunity to develop the capacity to choose.

We must be candid if a new policy is to emerge. Citizens and parents are systematically being denied their rights as citizens to reflect, and to choose the public education institutions that will meet their best interest. Accident and force have become the dominant means of achieving education policy. This situation cannot endure, for there is a paradox: public education needs parents as full partners, as citizens who will again take their rightful role as constitution-makers for local education institutions. Yet, increasingly, they are limited partners. The crisis in the legitimacy of public education can move towards resolution only when American public education policy is brought back into conformity with our moral imperatives of self-governance.

It is also ironic that the claims made for efficiency and effectiveness have not been met. Education research on economies of scale indicates that there are few economies of scale, that small schools can operate just as efficiently as large ones, and that there may well be systematic dis-economies of scale in large school systems. Further, some research indicates that students may develop stronger concepts of self, and be better prepared for the world of work and citizenship in small schools where participation in responsible school activities aids in real personal development.

Public Education as Choice, Opportunity and Community

There are no moral grounds for objecting to a public education system based on choice, opportunity and community, as long as all citizens have equal access to such a system. Likewise, there are no justifiable claims of efficiency or effectiveness to block us from moving to a new structuring of public education. We are thus faced with outlining the challenges, stating the ground rules and enunciating a new set of policies for public education.

We may not face an educational crisis but we do face an educational challenge. Declining test scores must be brought up, discipline--both behaviorial and intellectual--must be reintroduced into our schools, and students must be prepared for the world of work and citizenship. Or, to put it in terms of global competition, in the next 20 years we must re-industrialize our country to again lead the competition. Some scholars estimate that nearly 80 percent of this investment will be in the form of human capital formation: education.

Our present over-centralized, over-regulated and increasingly demoralized public schools will not be able to meet this challenge. What must come in their place is a public school system that is flexible and diverse, capable of responding to diverse demands and capable of producing quality education. We are not talking about a decentralized system. No, we are talking about an educational system built on the foundations of choice, opportunity and community. Educational institutions must again be the product of parents, educators, and citizens.

How Do We Achieve Such a System?

We must again develop policies and institutional arrangements that create strong incentives for individuals and communities to invest in their own education and that of the community. To do this we must focus our policy initiatives on state and federal governments.

State Policy

In most states there has been a steady drift towards greater state control of educational decision making and greater authority in state departments of education. State policy making has generally encouraged consolidation of local school districts, made it difficult for students to move between school districts and discouraged the emergence of specialized high schools. The following policies would clearly square with the moral foundations of self-governance and would also increase the efficiency of public schools:

- o All students, as a matter of constitutional or statutory policy, should have the right to attend any public school in their state, at no additional cost.
- o Citizens should have the right, free from state constraint, to break away from an existing school system to form their own school system.
- o State laws should authorize apprenticeship-partnerships between schools and business, beginning in the junior year of high school. Such programs would provide state aid to businesses willing to undertake such programs.

- o State laws should allow for school districts without boundaries, to permit the emergence of specialized schools that require large support populations.
- o No public school should be allowed to discriminate on the basis of race, sex, creed, or age.

These are minimal yet fundamental changes. If these policies were adopted, we would see the emergence of a competitive public school system, one that would not have captive students, but that could begin to specialize and perform adequately. These policies would create tremendous pressure on poorly performing schools to become responsive and provide quality education. These policies would turn existing authority relationships upside down and re-convey authority back to parents and local communities. In the most basic sense, they would create a voucher system within the public system and also create strong incentives for parents and citizens to invest in their public institutions.

Federal Policy

Federal policy can do much to create parental choice, educational opportunity and community. The most basic change is to turn federal policy away from supporting institutions to supporting individuals. Consistent with this thrust, the following policy changes should be given serious consideration:

- o Title I funds should be voucherized to increase the range of choices open to disadvantaged students to obtain remedial work. These vouchers should be redeemable at either private or public schools.
- o We should replace our present system of tuition grants and loans with Educational Opportunity Trusts that would allow parents to save money, tax free, for financing their children's high education. Further, the federal government should create a Higher Education Trust, administered by the states, to assist students from families who cannot afford to create and sustain their own Educational Opportunity Trust.
- o In the area of vocational education, the federal government should create incentives to stimulate the formation of school-business partnerships to allow students who want to enter the world of work, before graduation, to do so.
- o Federal compensatory programs not covered by the above recommendations should all be based on performance criteria. We should stop rewarding schools for failure and should reward them for success.
- o Finally, if the federal government is to continue in the field of educational research, it should concentrate on such problems as: how to bring discipline back to our schools, and how to achieve education for competence and education for literacy.